

COVER STORY

Push to market the doctor

Continued from Page 7

to board games.

Unlike most science fiction, it is produced without expensive special effects or a big-name star.

"It is a series that defies imagination," says Bill Greenstein, a vice president for Lionheart Productions, which distributes the show here. "It's science fiction with a different twist, with little funny plots, not the usual shoot-'em-ups."

Doctor Who not only defies imagination, it creates imagination.

It all started as a children's show in November 1963. English actor William Hartnell premiered as Doctor Who, the mysterious time lord from the planet Gallifrey. He was followed by Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee, Tom Baker, Peter Davison and Colin Baker. The transition of actors has been made easy by Who's ability to regenerate his body.

The show premiered in the USA in 1977 and is carried mostly by PBS stations. Viewers on this side of the Atlantic have seen the travels of three doctors — Pertwee, Tom Baker and Davison.

Baker is the best-known in the USA because he played Doctor Who for seven years and 172 episodes. Those episodes were the first to be shown here.

Starting in September, a number of stations will begin to show the Hartnell episodes for the first time.

Changing stars does not always sit well with viewers. Fans of the CBS hit soap *Dallas* reacted unfavorably to Donna Reed replacing Barbara Bel Geddes as Miss Ellie last season. Yet the merry-go-round of doctors seems to attract fans.

"Everyone can find a doctor at some point to relate to," explains producer John Nathan-Turner.

The change of doctors, Nathan-Turner contends, not only has brought new actors to the show, but new character traits that helped expand the plot.

"When you look at *Star Trek*, the format of the last episode was very much like the first. But the *Doctor Who* format is forever changing and developing."

Because of its British humor and campy charm, converts are made faster than Capt. Kirk can say, "Beam me up, Scotty." Just ask Ron Katz.

Katz is co-founder and president of the 40,000-member Doctor Who Fan Club of America. He was stunned when he first saw the program in 1981.

"I sat there for the first 15 minutes and I asked myself, 'What the hell am I watching?' It is so different than anything else on TV."

Doctor Who in any of his incarnations is a superhero. But he's fallible — at times inept. He's worldly but innocent, and always has a fun side. Tom Baker's doctor had an appetite for a candy he called a "jelly belly." Davison's doctor

loved to play cricket.

For all its charm and wit, however, *Doctor Who* has succeeded in the USA in spite of itself. Successful science fiction today is not made by just a smash film at the box office or high ratings on TV. Marketing makes the difference — and the marketing of *Doctor Who* until recently has been dismal.

The BBC originally placed a marginal interest in T-shirts and coffee mugs. The result: poorly made products and lots of bootlegged goods.

Lionheart Productions cracked down on the bootleggers when it replaced Time-Life Inc. as the distributor of *Doctor Who* in 1981. Eventually, "official" merchandise started to reach fans.

The mania may have come too late, says Gary Berman of Creation Conventions Inc., which organizes *Doctor Who* and other sci-fi conventions. "When it was really hot there was no merchandise to collect. Nothing could be as hot as *Doctor Who* was two years ago. Tom Baker could have been a big star. There should have been a *Doctor Who* movie."

Still, *Doctor Who* is no doctor do-little when it comes to making big money. The Denver-based Doctor Who Fan Club of America takes in a half-million dollars annually, selling everything from role-playing games to record albums.

And it's not just fan clubs reaping the harvest from *Doctor Who*'s popularity. The program gives PBS stations a shot in the arm during fund-raising.

"We helped raise in the range of \$62,000 for the station (KRMA) in Denver," says club president Katz, who frequently lends his fund-raising services to PBS stations.

Trudy Fowler, director of development for KRMA, says she can't recall the exact dollar figure, but does agree that *Doctor Who* brought in large donations three years ago.

Production of *Doctor Who* is currently on hiatus and will begin again in March. Rumors of a new *Doctor Who* film (there were two made in the '70s starring Peter Cushing) have *Who* buffs in a tizzy, just as Trekkies were when production of *Star Trek — The Motion Picture* was announced. Yet Nathan-Turner is cautious: "We have received various offers to make *Doctor Who* a movie which we are considering at this moment."

Until production resumes, the USA debut of the Hartnell episodes this fall and a *Doctor Who* convention with Davison in Chicago Sept. 7-8 at the Continental Hotel will have to fill the *Doctor Who* void.

But after 22 years and six actors, how many more lives can the doctor have? "The talk of a feature is enormous and that would signal a boom in popularity," says O'Neill. "If the feature does not happen, I think we'll see a certain amount of attrition in two or three years. But *Doctor Who* will never die completely."